SPARK CHANGE. SPEAK UP.

STEPPING TOWARD ADVOCACY
WELCOME. WE’RE GLAD YOU’RE HERE.

In this document, you’ll find information about how to be a better advocate. Before you start reading, we’d like to tell you how appreciative we are that you’re willing to have these conversations with yourself and with others. We hope what you read here will provide you with a few stepping stones toward better self-awareness and a better grasp on how you can be an effective advocate.
RECOGNIZING YOUR BIAS

Because we are all raised in unique circumstances, contexts, geographic locations, and even times in history, we are subject to an enormous amount of external influence. This influence frequently dictates what we like and dislike, and what we deem acceptable, moral, just, appropriate, or not. Think for a moment about the music your parents listened to when you were young. Do you like that music today? If not, is it nostalgic to hear it anyhow? This influence on our development transcends music, and impacts how we navigate and relate to the world around us every single day. This prejudice, in favor or against things, people, groups, and actions is known as bias.

Whether we like it or not, recognize it or not, each one of us holds certain biases that influence our judgements, behaviors, relationships, and navigation of the world around us. Biases are developed, both consciously and unconsciously, through our processes of development throughout every stage of our lives. Whether passed down from parents, taught in schools or churches, absorbed through media or politics, our individual and collective biases are regularly complicit in the mistreatment and harm (intended or not) of those around us—particularly those of marginalized and minoritized status.
There are two types of bias: Implicit bias and explicit bias.

**Implicit bias**

Implicit bias describes stereotypes and attitudes we hold towards people without our awareness or conscious knowledge.

Examples of gendered or racial stereotypes:
- Women are more emotional than men
- Black men are likely to be criminals
- Asian people excel in science and math

Video supplement: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEKd_7QL-q8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEKd_7QL-q8)

**Explicit bias**

Explicit bias may be viewed as an enhanced and more direct bias in that they are attitudes or stereotypes that we are aware of and perpetuate ourselves. In other words, willfully engaging in harmful and unfair thinking, actions, or practices.

Examples of explicit bias include, but are not limited to:
- Overt racism or racist comments
- The denial of promotions or equity in pay
- Homophobic, transphobic, or otherwise derogatory statements, slurs, or remarks
BUILDING SELF-AWARENESS

Becoming self-aware takes time and necessitates deep reflection, honesty with yourself, and in many cases, a considerable amount of pain and guilt. We may carry a certain degree of shame when we realize the biases that we hold. However, it is only by recognizing these traits within ourselves that we better understand where they come from and can then work to change them in proactive and positive ways. It may be difficult to recognize our own biases, but fortunately there are ways in which we might better understand ourselves and the biases we hold. These practices will help us hold ourselves accountable and to be more mindful and intentional.

What to do:

Ask for feedback from a partner, friends, colleagues, or family. As difficult as it may be, seeking an outside perspective may be one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal.

- Ask for kindness and honesty.
- Remain open-minded and receptive to the feedback you receive.
- Reflect on the response(s) you receive. This may take the form of journaling or discussing what you have come to realize about yourself with a friend or loved one.
- Based on the feedback, make an action plan on how to be more present and deliberate in your behavior and mentality.
Take a self-assessment questionnaire or quiz:

1. Harvard University has developed a series of free, comprehensive and effective Implicit Association Tests (IAT).

2. Make a list of your own intersectionality; your privileges and oppression and reflect on this list. Through this practice you may begin to develop a greater sense of self-awareness. Self-aware individuals earnestly attempt to better understand various aspects about themselves, including their strengths and weaknesses, their limitations, their skills, their values, and their biases.

There are two types of self-awareness:

*Internal self-awareness*

Clearly understanding our own feelings and thoughts.

*External self-awareness*

Understanding how others perceive us.

It is only when we begin to become more self-aware, accountable, and critical of ourselves that we can engage in challenging conversations with others. Recognizing our personal failures and ways in which we’ve grown, challenged our own perspectives, or changed our minds about something we were once certain about is a powerful tool in relating to or connecting with another person. It can be especially helpful when that person is not aware of, or is indifferent to, their bias, prejudice, or otherwise problematic and harmful behavior.
THE POWER OF YOUR LANGUAGE

Why the words we say matter.

Language is one of the primary means of communicating thoughts and feelings, ideas, and intention. In turn, the things we say are also ways we convey any biases we hold. Deliberate and inclusive language use may mean the difference between making someone feel welcome and seen, or making them feel excluded, hurt, and othered.

Other(ing)

Other(ing) means to place someone in a category that is separate from the dominant group or the status quo. This placement may be physical, but it is more often a stigmatized social categorization that is made to make the targeted person, as well as the people around them, recognize that they are different.

Think about the process of picking teams in gym class. There is a clear and deliberate stratification of power in this process. Two people are appointed “team captains.” These captains take turns choosing who they want on their team until two students remain. The stigma with being picked last is enormous.
As you stand there on the sideline, looking at each of your classmates who have been picked before you, you are acutely aware of how undesirable you are; that others view you as weak, unathletic, or a liability to the success of their chosen squad.

Othering someone is very much akin to picking someone last. They may be extremely aware that they are the only BIPOC, woman, LGBTQIA+, disabled, immigrant, non-native speaker, or senior person in the room. Othering another person based on a trait, characteristic, or identity that is beyond their control is the opposite of inclusion.
Racialized language and actions

It is likely that you are aware of the most derogatory slurs and phrases, and have removed them from your vocabulary, but there are other ways that we might other people:

• Asking someone where they are from:

  “No, but where are you really from?” Questions like this are invasive and a form of microaggression, which serves only to indicate that the first thing that you notice about someone is that they are not part of the dominant group or class in a particular location or context.

• Touching someone’s skin or hair without consent:

  Actions like these exoticize the person involved. Physically engaging someone without their consent is never acceptable. When this boundary is breached with someone of a differing racial or ethnic group with the intent to point out a unique and natural trait about their body, it signals that you do not respect their personal autonomy. It also signals that your interest in the difference you perceive and admire about them is more important to you than their comfort or well-being. Despite your intentions, this is wrong every time.

• Forced code-switching:

  An inappropriate example of code-switching might look like changing your vocabulary and colloquial phrase usage in a context that is not your own. For example, utilizing the words “brotha” or “sista” when you are in the presence of a Black person, or peppering “urban” vocabulary or a rural accent into your language when you are in the presence of someone who hails from a different region. Not only is this behavior tacky, it is also extremely presumptuous and in most cases very offensive.
Gender-exclusive language

Take for example drafting a text to invite a new friend from work to your house for a barbeque. You know this friend is married, so you write: “Please bring your wife!” By utilizing the gendered term “wife,” you are assuming this friend is engaged in a heterosexual and heteronormative marriage, and that their partner identifies as female.

This assumption discounts the possibility that your new friend may be in a relationship that defies heteronormativity and is perhaps married to someone who identifies as nonbinary or is transgender. Such presumptions indicate to your friend that you only view heterosexual marriages as valid. This may not be your intention, but it may signal something particularly exclusionary to someone you are earnestly trying to get to know. Instead of husband or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend, more inclusive language choices may include “spouse” or “partner.”

Other examples of exclusionary gendered language:

- “ladies and gentlemen”
- “his and hers”
Ageism in language

In a society that clearly values youth and tends to discount age and experience, deeming such traits as antiquated or stale, the language we utilize regarding age may be particularly harmful to a considerable portion of our population. Some words like distinguished, wise, or experienced have positive connotations. Others can be downright rude and hurtful with the intent to denigrate or deem irrelevant the experiences, insights, and perspectives of those who have lived on this planet longer. Terms like “Dried up,” “Geriatric,” “Geezer,” “Grandma” or “Grandpa,” “Fogey,” and many others tend to other older individuals in our society and indicate that the younger generations discount, or have lost patience with, what they have to offer.

Ableist language

Much of the language we use to convey negative, adverse, or undesirable traits about ourselves or others are unfortunately derived from the names of disabilities, or their short form. Consider the following terms: blind, deaf, dumb, spaz (derived from “spastic”), crippled, special needs, or handicapped. Now think about how frequently these words are peppered throughout everyday language use, seemingly with little to no ill-intent or malice.

When someone says, “That’s really dumb,” for example, what they are indicating is that they believe the subject to which they are referring is silly or ridiculous. The historical definition of the word “dumb,” however, would suggest that they are indicating that the subject is “unable to speak, most typically because of congenital deafness.” While the colloquial connotation of this word may have shifted with time, its
original meaning still serves as the framework of its reference and its usage remains harmful and offensive to many.

Despite the common nature of certain phrases and their usage, it would behoove us all to question who may be directly affected or harmed by the seemingly innocuous or benign language we use so casually.

**Honoring pronouns**

So many elements of the language we use are gendered, meaning they ascribe a gender, typically along a heteronormative binary, to their subject. Personal pronouns are no exception. Personal or gender pronouns are utilized in language as a placeholder for people’s names. These identifying markers have, in recent history, remained aligned along the constructs of the gender binary. Unfortunately, as commonplace as pronouns are, the gendered implications they may hold are not always helpful or accurate when considering the myriad of realities, perspectives, and truths held by people around the world and their unique and individual identities.

Assuming gender or misgendering someone via incorrect pronouns may unintentionally send an unwelcoming or harmful message regarding the expectation of gender normativity. It can also send the message that counter-normative identities are viewed as unworthy of respect and acknowledgement, or are just plain unacceptable. Mis-gendering someone also implies that a person must look a certain way to demonstrate or express a particular gender. External or physical characteristics, attire, or affectations are not an accurate representation or indication of how someone may identify. It is best to clarify pronouns before making an assumption purely based on superficial attributes.
Utilizing someone’s correct pronouns is one of the most basic ways to indicate visibility and respect and serves to promote a more inclusive environment.

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<th>OBJECTIVE (OBJECT)</th>
<th>POSSESSIVE ADJECTIVE</th>
<th>POSSESSIVE PRONOUN</th>
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**Honoring pronouns**

Even if your gender pronouns align with the binary, you may take the following steps to ensure that you indicate to others that you respect their pronouns and identities:

- Include your pronouns in your introductions:

  Whether it is in conversation or in your email signature, offering your pronouns to others indicates that you will honor and respect theirs.
• Ask others for their pronouns - Gender pronouns are not private or secret and are, by design, meant to be utilized by others. Keep it simple and ask in one of the following ways:

  1. “How would you prefer I refer to you?”
  2. “What pronouns do you use?”
  3. “How would you like to be addressed?”

Be sure to continue this practice even if you have been previously introduced to a person’s pronouns, as pronouns and gender identity are fluid and may change or evolve from your last introduction.

When someone shares their pronouns with you, whether it be he/him, she/her, they/them, or any number of others (and there are MANY), they are engaging in an act of trust and mutual respect predicated on the understanding that you will honor their identity as they would yours. Though pronouns may be confusing to incorporate into your everyday life at first, it truly doesn’t take long to incorporate the inclusive practice of understanding and honoring them.

For a more in-depth guide to understanding and honoring the use of pronouns, visit: [https://www.mypronouns.org/](https://www.mypronouns.org/).
Think of the last time you overheard someone in public say something offensive or inappropriate. What made you notice it? How did it make you feel? Did anyone challenge them? Did you? How do you think it would make a person of the targeted and marginalized class feel? Checking our own language use can be difficult, but helping others understand the importance of inclusive and non-offensive language use can be even more challenging. Unfortunately, modern language is riddled with antiquated and offensive phrases, idioms, and terms that have become commonplace and are too casually utilized. Though they have become vernacular, these disparaging words still hold harmful and damaging connotations.

Consider these terms:

- Retarded
- Gay
- Homo
- Nigger/Nigga
- Dumb
- Faggot/fag
- Oriental
- “Peanut gallery”
- Spaz
- Basket case
- Rule-of-thumb
- Gay
- Thug
- “Off the reservation”
- Spinster
- Old maid
- Eeny meey miny moe
- “Indian giver”

Each of these terms, phrases, and idioms (though some are clearly more overtly offensive than others) hold histories and enduring connotations that are harmful and disparaging, even if they’re not meant to be. A quick Google search will help you understand why each of these terms is offensive and problematic.
HOW TO BE AN ADVOCATE

Support a nonprofit organization or small business.

Seek out nonprofit organizations that are minority-led or owned. Such businesses rely on the support of volunteers and monetary donations to operate, so contact the ones you may be interested in and keep an open mind and heart with the work or tasks they assign you.

Remember, volunteerism is a supportive role and the small tasks you may be assigned might seem benign or tedious to you. Trust that each hour that you spend involved with an organization helps them continue to do the important work they do within your community and beyond.

Learn when to listen.

Listening requires educational labor. Presuming that a member of a marginalized group will volunteer their time and energy, revisit trauma, and endure questions they’ve answered countless times before, is not only insensitive and self-gratifying, but it is offensive. The onus of labor is on each of us to educate ourselves and take the lead from those most immediately affected by the issues we purport to care so deeply about. However, if a person from a marginalized group decides to share with you, listen.

As a member of a dominant group or class it may feel natural to want to take up the heart of a fight on behalf of a marginalized person or group. However, the way in which we deem the most effective avenue
Equally as important as learning when to listen is understanding when to be vocal. If someone is in danger, or there is an immediate threat to the safety of others, you are of course obligated to intervene. Yet, there are certain situations in which a debate, a conversation, or other engagement between a person of non-dominant or marginalized class and a person of a dominant one should not be interrupted. Trust and respect the ability and autonomy of the persons involved unless otherwise called upon. Interjections of this nature may undermine the conversation and feed what is known as the “savior complex,” or the compulsive need to assume that anyone of a minoritized category is in need of saving. This is often not the case and, in speaking up, you may be doing far more harm than good.

Consider the following example of when you should intervene: Imagine you are out with a group on a Friday night. One of the people—who you don’t know very well—says something derogatory regarding Mexican immigrants. None of the group are Mexican or Hispanic. Everyone gets quiet and no one is quite sure what to say or do. Likely most of the people in this group are as offended as you are, but everyone is waiting for someone else to say something. YOU can be that someone else. This is an example of a perfect opportunity to correct abhorrent behavior. Not only will you indicate that you and your group won’t tolerate prejudice or discrimination, but you will also embolden those around you to step up and say something in future situations!
Join a reading group or attend a lecture.

There are endless resources and opportunities to further your education that are free and available to you. A quick Google search may help you find a reading group in your area or even online. Such groups present great opportunities to engage with complex and challenging concepts in a safe, controlled, intellectual, and interactive environment. Be sure to engage in meaningful ways with the readings. Take notes and participate in conversations and debates to ensure that you demonstrate an appropriate degree of respect for the space, as well as get as much as possible from the experience as you can.

Similarly, universities and other organizations frequently hold lectures featuring activists, authors, and community leaders that are open to the public and present no or nominal cost to you. Be sure to take a notepad to jot down your thoughts for later reflection and discussion with friends.

Donate.

Nonprofit organizations, advocacy and mutual aid groups, as well as activists rely heavily on the monetary contributions of supporters like you. If it is within your means, donate what is reasonable in your current financial situation. Whether it is $5 or $500, every single cent counts and is appreciated by these groups who are at the heart of the fight against injustice.
Engaging with systems of oppression is an emotionally heavy labor. Frankly, it does not feel very good to look in the face of our own biases and complicity in systemic disparities and injustices. However, it is not until we understand these elements within ourselves and of the world around us that we are able to find the agency and motivation to engage in this labor in tangible and meaningful ways. It is through this agency that we might collectively strive to dismantle external oppressive forces in our society.

**THINGS TO REMEMBER IN YOUR GROWTH**

*You will feel bad.*
You will make mistakes, but you can learn from them.

It is inevitable that through this work we will make mistakes. We might have slip ups in misgendering someone, utilizing an offensive phrase we know better than to utter, or we might get into a heated argument with someone because the stakes are so high and we care so deeply about the issues at hand. This is normal. As we grow and develop as advocates and allies we will not only hone our skills of navigating these emotions and spaces, but we will learn from and collaborate with others, ultimately finding more effective ways to navigate and champion these matters.

It is inevitable that you will screw up. When you do, own up to it, reflect on it and do the work to ensure that you handle the situation more appropriately in the future. It is not easy, but keep in mind that we are all a work in progress and we must keep moving forward.

**Change starts with all of us.**